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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WATERS

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TAGS: PREL KWBG PBTS KPAL IS

SUBJECT: MASKIYYOT: NEW SETTLEMENT DEVELOPMENT OPPOSITE
PRE-MILITARY SCHOOL

REF: TEL AVIV 4994

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. During a visit to the Maskiyyot pre-army school on December 29, students told Poloff that houses for 30 families evacuated from Gush Katif would be constructed in a separate, uncleared area, opposite the highway from the school. Peace Now's chief settlement watcher told Poloff that Maskiyyot is a new residential settlement, whose approval is likely related to GOI negotiations with settlers on outposts. The Settlers' Council (YESHA) told Poloff that approval of construction is the late fulfillment of a 2005 promise to settlers and is connected to current negotiations on outposts. Palestinian reaction to Maskiyyot's approval has been highly negative, with Sa'eb Erekat and other Palestinian leaders telling the press and the Consul General that the announcement, so soon after a positive meeting between Israeli PM Ehud Olmert and PA President Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen), will undermine progress between the two sides.
End Summary.

Visit to Maskiyyot

¶2. (C) Poloff visited the Maskiyyot pre-army school, which consists of seven buildings occupying about one-half acre, on December 29. 40 Orthodox students study Torah/Talmud daily and train once weekly in military subjects. The students said that Maskiyyot was a NAHAL (military/civilian) camp from 1985 until 1998, when it was abandoned. They said Maskiyyot was revived in 2002 as a pre-army school for young Orthodox men to study both religious and military subjects prior to military service. Several of the students said that they intend to return to Maskiyyot to live after military service.

New Housing Will Be in
Separate, Uncleared Area

¶3. (C) The students said they had known of plans to move 30 families, evacuated from Gush Katif and currently housed in Hemdat (a settlement about 30km from Maskiyyot), to the area. These families would not live in the school, but rather in a separate area on the opposite (west) side of the highway (Hwy 578). Poloff observed that this area, on top of rolling hills, is presently uncleared, has no infrastructure for residential development, and is presently inhabited only by Beduin sheepherders who have three shacks in the vicinity.

Peace Now: New Settlement
Likely Part of Deal with Settlers

¶4. (C) Peace Now Settlements Watch Coordinator Dror Etkes told Poloff December 27 that new residential construction is not imminent on the site, but Peace Now is seriously concerned both about the approval and about GOI willingness to make concessions to settlers. He said that the approval is likely "a bone thrown" for settlers to soften Defense Minister Amir Peretz' announced plans to dismantle several West Bank outposts. He cautioned, however, that while plans to dismantle outposts commonly are delayed for months or years and rarely are carried out, approval of a new settlement is a permanent step that has not historically been reversed.

YESHA on Maskiyyot Development

¶5. (C) Jerusalem YESHA Council spokesperson Emily Amrusi told Poloff December 27 that approval of construction in Maskiyyot is a positive development, but comes 18 months later than it should have. She said that the Defense Ministry had promised the Gush Katif evacuees that Maskiyyot would be built in mid-2005, but that the GOI had reneged on its promise, leaving the evacuees in limbo. The 30 families are living in temporary quarters in nearby Hemdat, she said, and do not expect to move into new homes in Maskiyyot for at least two years.

¶6. (C) Amrusi said MoD Peretz approved construction in Maskiyyot as part of negotiations with YESHA on outpost legalization and evacuation. YESHA's position is that settlers will evacuate one outpost voluntarily, without police or IDF participation, for each outpost the MoD agrees to legalize, she said. Before YESHA would agree to this

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arrangement, however, settlers want fulfillment of past agreements which she said the GOI had failed to implement, principally approval of Maskiyyot.

¶7. (C) According to Amrusi, Maskiyyot's future residents are primarily highly ideological young couples and strongly believe in their duty to settle in the West Bank. For this reason they want to settle in the Jordan Valley, to cement this area's ties to Israel, she said.

¶8. (C) Amrusi said that Maskiyyot is state land that settlers previously occupied, and thus is new construction in an existing settlement, not a new settlement. Little or no additional state money will be required to develop and build homes in Maskiyyot, she asserted, as compensation funds allotted to the families from their evacuation from Gaza will pay most costs.

Palestinian Reaction

¶9. (C) Palestinian reaction to news and timing of Maskiyyot's approval has been highly negative. PLO Chief Negotiator Sa'eb Erekat told Arabic-language media December 26 that the approval of Maskiyyot will undermine progress achieved in the meeting between Prime Minister Olmert and PA President Abbas, while PA spokesmen questioned the motivation of the approval's timing so soon after the Olmert-Abbas meeting, saying that it would be a major stumbling block to efforts to revive the peace process. In separate meetings with the Consul General since the announcement, Erekat and PLC members Hanan Ashrawi and Mustafa Barghuthi have also expressed grave concern. They point to the approval as a "dangerous political message" and urged a strong U.S. reaction.

Comment

¶10. (C) Whether Maskiyyot is classified as a "new settlement" or an "expansion of an existing settlement," it would appear that this new settlement activity is inconsistent with Israeli obligations under the Roadmap. The GOI decision is even more troublesome because Maskiyyot is beyond the security barrier, raising questions about GOI intentions in the Jordan Valley. The timing is also unfortunate, coming just as the two sides are beginning to resume contacts after a 6-year hiatus in negotiations.

WALLES